

Personal View

As I am unlikely to qualify for an obituary in your columns myself, I wonder if my dog could have one in my place? He may not have been much of a diagnostician, but he was a formidable therapeutic weapon. He was born in 1962, the eldest son of Victoria Plum and Duck's Cottage Prinny and the descendant of a long line of exotically entitled Cavalier King Charles spaniels. He belonged to a patient of mine who sold him to me at a generous discount as a Christmas present for my children. At 6 weeks old he was already a man of immense distinction and extraordinary charm. His name was Candytuft of Arabis. We called him Charles for five minutes and Charlie for the remainder of his life. I laugh now when I think that he was supposed to be our children's pet.

On his first night we began as we meant to go on. We shut him in the kitchen. On the next night he slept in our room. By morning he was not only on, but in our bed. And there he stayed. One by one, with an obstinate folly which had something really rather heroic about it, we broke every rule laid down for the training of our dumb friends. We allowed him on the furniture. We pandered to his every whim. If there were two courses open to us it was his and not our convenience which was consulted.

From his first year it was his happy custom to accompany me of an afternoon on my visits to the old and to the chronic sick. By them he was adored, but his attitude was ambivalent. While as anxious as the next man to comfort and to cure, it's not the slightest use pretending that he didn't regard our visits as an interruption of the real business of the day which was to take him for those walks which were the passion of his life. Not on a lead: if there was one thing at which Charlie drew the line it was at restraint in any form, but roaming freely about the Surrey hedgerows, condescending to other lesser breeds we met along the way, and returning to me at his discretion rather than at mine.

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In 1966 his liking for the great outdoors was his undoing. While waiting for me in the car outside a patient's house he jumped out of the window into the road, perhaps to try and persuade me to cut short the visit, and was knocked over by a passing car. He sustained a fracture dislocation of his hip. I thought it was all up with him. His medical adviser was made of sterner stuff. He contrived a sling for his affected limb and encouraged us to exercise him on his three remaining legs. For the rest of his life, although under doctor's orders for arthritis, he progressed remarkably efficiently with a peculiar lurching sort of lope.

In the years that followed the great events of Charlie's life were our biennial visits to high ground; in the English Lake District in spring for preference, rather than to the Scottish summer peaks, because these involved days spent by the seaside, and Charlie never really liked the sea. With his keen sense of what was owed to his dignity I think he felt that the seaside was no place for the grown man. In no time at all our holidays were planned to suit his preferences and we settled down in cottages or in hotels that not only tolerated but welcomed dogs. After a

day above the 2000 foot contour what Charlie liked was to lie dozing by the fire in remote hostelrys being made much of by our fellow guests and where he could continue his slumbers beside us in our bedroom. One way and another he began to dominate our lives to an extent which our friends, in whose houses he was often an uninvited guest, considered to be unhealthy. But they were only occasionally at the receiving end of what Charlie had to offer. I suppose that every owner suspects that his dog is perfect. We didn't suspect: we knew. He was affectionate; he was infinitely patient; he was tolerant and indefatigably kind.

As the years went by he began to resemble a very superior sort of butler. Stately, unhurried, cordial without being effusive, insidiously taking over the management of our affairs. A very Jeeves among dogs with his owners' good at heart but neither subservient nor obsequious.

When he was 10 he began to go the way that all good butlers go. He thickened round the waist and showed signs of loss of elasticity, and it was borne upon us that there might come a time when we should have to do without his services. To cushion ourselves against this dreadful day we acquired his first cousin once removed. With Willie his relationship was affable rather than effusive. He tolerated his high spirits but abdicated none of the perquisites of seniority. If Willie got on to our bed he shoved him gently off. More to the point he shamed our faithlessness by fining himself down and speeding himself up. As late as the summer of his last year he made it to the top of Scafel Pike. Perhaps he was a little slower, a little wearier of an evening, a little less inclined to stray far from our side.

With the falling leaf he began to fail. His sight deteriorated and he had a minor stroke. Thereafter, although still able and eager for a stroll, he mostly slept.

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He went out with the old year. For a month his only exercise was a turn round the garden twice a day. At length even this became too much for him. Perhaps we should have asked his doctor to intervene sooner but there was still a flicker from his old half opened eyes of that sardonic humour with which he'd always looked upon the world. On his last night my wife slept with him on the couch. At half past four she woke me up to say that he was in agony. I gave him pethidine and he dozed off to wake again repeatedly distressed. At dawn I rang up his, by now beloved, physician. Before he came I was called out to see a patient. When I returned it was all over. May all our doctors be so merciful when we too get beyond the hills.

That afternoon we buried Charlie at the bottom of the garden in his blanket. And yet in the spring when the daffodils which we planted on him flowered I didn't feel that underneath their blooms was much that mattered of our friend. But rather that all that was real of him was running free with that quaint halting gait of his in his beloved hills. And that we were with him there.

And meanwhile there is Willie wrapping *himself* round our hearts, with whom it's all to do again.

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